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## Encounters with identity: reflexivity and positioning in an interdisciplinary research project

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Title: Encounters with identity: reflexivity and positioning in an interdisciplinary research project

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## Abstract

This paper discusses researcher identity, positioning, and reflexivity as they relate to the experience of a researcher on an interprofessional research project. The project collected video recordings of students and healthcare professionals in university and clinical settings. During the process of data collection, 'conversations' emerged between the researcher and participants. They occurred before and after recordings took place and outside of the planned methods of data collection. These unaccounted-for-encounters between the researcher and participant produced a negotiated understanding of who each other were and how it related to the research process. But dichotomous notions of insider and outsider identity seemed too fixed to examine the social construction of knowledge produced in these encounters. This paper examines the methodological reflections on those unaccounted-for-encounters, which emerged as instances of participant focussed reflexivity. It aims to demonstrate how positioning can offer a more refined means with which to highlight the processes and practices which participants and researchers undertake in interaction. These researcher-participant encounters were sites of knowledge construction transversing professional and educational territories and transient opportunities for negotiated intersubjectivity. As such, they highlight the role that positioning can play in not only individual methodological matters but for multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary research teams.

KEYWORDS: Positioning, positioning theory, researcher identity, reflexivity

## 1. Introduction

Drawing on the methodological reflections of an educational researcher working on an interprofessional education research project, this paper discusses the notions of researcher identity, reflexivity, and positioning. The identity of researchers as insiders or outsiders (or somewhere in between) are held to be important concepts in educational research methods literature and discussed in relation to their advantages and disadvantages for research undertaken in school, institutions, family, social, and cross-cultural contexts (Mercer 2007; Labaree 2002; Thomson and Gunter 2011; Katyal and King 2011; Sikes and Potts 2008; Perryman 2011; Merriam et al. 2001). Researcher identity is often examined using the concept of reflexivity, a term which has been adopted on a wide-scale (Macbeth 2001; Salzman, 2002) and seeks, in some definitions, to defend the situatedness of all social knowledge in qualitative research. Although it can be approached from and takes many perspectives, forms and varieties (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Lynch 2000), early in their careers educational researchers are minded to ask themselves "how they will address reflexivity" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007, 90). This places the concept of reflexivity on a par with other criterion of 'good' research and is used as a basis for judgement on the quality of research (Bennett 1998; Adkins 2002). Once viewed as a practice which allows "researchers to be aware of how their subjectivity may be shaping their inquiry and its outcomes" (Peshkin 1988, 17), Berger (2015) more recently observes that reflexivity is "commonly viewed as the process of continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation" (Berger 2015, 220).

On closer inspection, researcher identity and reflexivity are more highly contested constructs than their relationships with other markers of rigour would indicate, and some current use of these notions perhaps belies their origins as a focus of attention for feminist research (Oakley 1981). Adkins (2002) and Skeggs (2002), amongst others, problematize the use of reflexivity as a means to uncovering and privileging 'who you (the researcher) are' in social science research. The concern for some in knowing 'who is the researcher' seems to index a need to remove the bias which disguises the most 'truthful' meaning possible. On such claims Salzman (2002) argues that:

objectivity and truth are really just claims of power, claims that a vision from one position should be given priority. But the reality is that there is no objectivity or truth (although presumably this statement is an exception), just different views from different perspectives (Salzman, 2002, 807)

On the one hand, a concern with researcher bias does not acknowledge the social construction of knowledge (Garfinkel 1967) and on the other, serves to disempower participants by implying that they can (always) be manipulated into the production of knowledge by a leading question or a coercive manifestation of identity. This oversimplifies the enactment of social and moral order, somewhat. Divining 'who you are' as a means to objectivity, as a concept which has methodological value, can strip knowledge of the power relations involved in its construction and diminish the subject to a passive object (Belmonte 1979). The displays of searching for one's subjectivity (Peshkin 1988) through research diaries and notes offering the minutia of daily toil may be argued for and assumed necessary in carrying out qualitative research, but such approaches and methods themselves are "no guarantee of equal power relations between the researcher and the researched" (Oakley 2005, 187). Pillow (2003) suggests the trends in the use of reflexivity reflect methodological concerns to validate and legitimize qualitative research and argues for its critical use to explore uncomfortable complexities in presenting and representing knowledge, arguing that it cannot be a "simple story of subjects, subjectivity, and transcendence or self-indulgent telling" (192). While personal narratives are assumed "to offer uniquely privileged data of the social world" (Coffey 2002:313) issues remain with regard to "overindulgence and narcissism" (314) in the representation of the self. The relationship between 'privileging' and 'reflexivity' can itself be examined in ways that when uncovered illustrate unchallenged issues of power (Skeggs 2002).

In this paper, I question, as others have done, the assertion that exposing researcher identity (be it inside, outside, or between) and "doing" reflexivity are inherently positive or helpful activities which lead to a better understanding of the social construction of knowledge and the process of research which produces it (Skeggs 2002; Adkins 2002; Lynch 2000; Lather 2001; Atkinson 1997). With the methodological reflections of data-gathering encounters in an interprofessional education research project, I offer an examination of positioning, drawing on Positioning Theory, as an alternative to the concepts of researcher identity or role. Recalling Skeggs (2002), this returns to "reflexivity as practice and process [...] not a property of the self" (369). The outcome is two-fold; it demonstrates situated reflexivity in action and it brings participant reflexivity to the fore, so often given scant attention (Berger 2015).

The project referred to in this paper involved the collection of video and audio recordings of students and teachers in a number of healthcare professions in university, hospital, and clinical settings. The collaboration of team members, departmental administrators, institutional and governmental bodies and the participation of over five hundred students, university staff, and healthcare professionals led to over ninety hours of

recordings from several sites. Focus groups with students and staff were also carried out (Morison and O'Boyle 2008). The overall aim of the project was to develop research-informed opportunities for healthcare students from different disciplines to learn together, and a number of outcomes related to the project have been reported (McMullan 2009; Montgomery, Morison and Johnston 2009). The methodological reflections in this paper are not an example of going back to the data years later with new eyes (Berger 2015). They are more akin to Thomson and Gunter (2011), where years after participation in the project ended reflection of the research process continues.

In the process of collecting data for this project, 'conversations' emerged between the researcher and participants. They occurred before and after recordings took place, and outside of the planned methods of data collection. Despite the purpose of the contact to collect consent forms and press a record button on a machine, what emerged was an unaccounted-for encounter between the educational researcher and the healthcare professional participant. Such encounters did not complete a solely transactional function. The experience of these momentary unaccounted-for-encounters might be termed incidental data, but unlike Griffiths (1985) these were not conversations overhead by chance or treated as data for which consent was not negotiated. These were the kind of encounter which may slip by in the machinery of large research projects or go largely unnoticed as the small talk of everyday personable interaction. Nonetheless, they were a social encounter of the kind which any researcher who has contact with participants experiences (Oakley 1981), regardless of the methodological approach. Understanding how and why these unaccounted-for-encounters created a certain knowledge seemed, at the time, important.

Yet, the notion of researcher identity was not helpful in coming to know why and how these encounters happened at all and why they produced the knowledge they did or indeed what to do with the knowledge produced. It seemed entirely circular and slightly absurd to rely on explanations of static identities and roles to reason these matters when the key notion under investigation in the interdisciplinary project itself was professional identity. Instead, some years later, I understand these as social encounters where power and knowledge were negotiated by individuals and in which rights and duties were enacted (Harré and van Langenhove 1999). They were moments in which participants actively took up positions in relation to their participation in the research and the research itself, without being asked to do so. It is not the intention now to account for these unaccounted-for-encounters through the voice of an authorizing omniscient narrator (Skeggs 2002; Lather 2001; Atkinson 1997). It is to draw on and attention to these encounters, these unexpected observational instances, which Weick (2002) may refer to as 'real-time reflexivity' and Riach (2009) considers 'sticky moments' in order to demonstrate situated reflexivity in action and bring participant reflexivity to the fore.

Discussing researcher identity, role, and reflexivity, as important but at times problematic in educational research, I suggest that an examination of positioning which draws on Positioning Theory may be a way of overcoming some of the concerns which these concepts raise. It shifts the focus away from the self and enables the consideration of both researcher and participant practices in the construction of their interpersonal relations. To some extent this re-personalizes the "depersonalized participants" (Oakley 1981, 37) and reiterates our essentially human characteristics and ultra-social ways of being. As Positioning Theory requires that relations of power be addressed by considering the enactment of rights, and duties in moral and social order, there is clearer access to the complexity of ethical issues sometimes stifled by institutional approaches to ethical concerns (White and Fitzgerald 2010).

As the socio-political environment of educational research moves towards more interdisciplinary and team-based research, it is crucial to reassess the usefulness of the notion of insider-outsider research. At its worst in such an environment, a superficial approach to the notion of researcher identity may only reproduce the same cultural knowledge about professions, disciplines, social groups, and individuals. It therefore may fail to contribute an understanding of what has to be present for the phenomenon under research to appear at all (Probyn 1993). Permeable boundaries of disciplines may be overlooked, or imaginary ones reaffirmed. Assumptions of shared knowledge which are never made explicit may hinder interdisciplinary working. Professions, and arguably disciplines have their own 'sub cultures' or discipline specific practices (Groom 2005) within which "unmarked insiderness" (Labaree 2002, 118) can pose issues. But at its best, critically reflexive practices can produce insight into topic and process. As disciplinary boundaries open up and as larger multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary teams become more commonplace, an examination of positioning can be used to make both the tacit knowledge and the power enacted through relationships available for consideration. This can assist researchers to attune to the processes of the social construction of knowledge both within the research teams and in the process of research. Drawing on the unaccounted-for-encounters mentioned earlier, I aim to illustrate what can be gained from an examination of positioning, before concluding why this discussion of positioning *vs* role is important to contemporary educational research methods.

## **2. Identity, reflexivity, and positioning**

The presentation and representation of the self can be a complex act. Discussing Goffman's (1959) presentation of the self, Harré and van Langenhove (1999) note that many personal and public personas are presented in the interpersonal interaction of everyday life and that any one of a number of such personas can be dominant in a particular context. In relation to researcher identity however the enactment of personas can sometimes be reduced to a list of situated identities (e.g. male or female, 20s or 40s, researcher or practitioner, nurse or doctor). Arguably, this merely reproduces existing sociocultural and professional stereotypes and says little of how such descriptions of people influence the data being produced or the construction of knowledge in the process of research. Pillow (2003) argues that the lack of exposition with regard to the effect of situated identities on the interpretation of data is problematic. The reduction of enacted personas to a list of identities for presentation seems at least Cartesian and at worst fatalistic. Moreover, a confessional stance to the epistemic processes of data construction (van Maanen 1988) adopted in some ethnographic writing seems as if one is somehow purging oneself of one's subjectivity.

But to understand how subjectivity, status differentials, positions of power, perceived or real, develop seems a more fruitful discussion to have than the researcher identifying themselves as an insider or outsider (or somewhere in between).

To live in society, and even in our families, means that we all, to some degree, learn to understand people different from ourselves. The argument that we must be like them or, better, one of them to understand them begins to seem less an epistemologically justified position than a political boundary to silence people beyond constructed boundaries (Salzman, 2002, 808)

Perhaps a more interesting question on the role of a researcher's identity is why does an examination of the self or a list of situated identities result in the most 'truthful' meaning possible? Skeggs (2002) argues for a move away from such self-description and disclosures to focus on practices and participants. In order to come to an understanding of what exists as knowledge, or is constructed as knowledge, one needs to appreciate "what had to be held in

place in order for this self to appear at all” (Probyn 1993, 80). The fixed notion of ‘researcher identity’ is to some extent complicit in maintaining unchallenged assumptions, unexamined knowledge, and to a larger extent, may fail to uncover the complex relationships of power and ideology that lie beneath the knowledge that is constructed in qualitative research between researcher and participant (Skeggs 2002; Adkins 2002).

Issues regarding the bifurcation of researcher identity into ‘insider-outsider’ are much discussed and there is a strong awareness of the oversimplification of these dichotomous notions of researcher identity (Milligan 2016; McNess, Arthur, and Crossley 2013; Henry 2001; Merchant and Willis 2001; Stanfield 1994). Nonetheless, researchers have set about accounting for the impact of the researcher’s identity/identities on the research process through the use of critical reflexivity. As in Milligan (2016), a researcher can undertake a critical self-evaluation and continual acknowledgement that they have an effect on the research and, crucially, explain how it affects the research process.

Other uses of reflexivity in educational research aim to help the researcher to manage the process of research; monitor involvement and attachment, or enhance rigour and ethics (Katyal and King 2011) and “ponder the ways in which who they are may both assist and hinder the process of the co-construction of meaning” (Berger 2015, 221). But perhaps, such use tends towards a partial if not self-focused concern in which researchers return to ask of themselves: How do I manage the perceptions that participants have about me? What do I need to do in this situation? More rarely does the use of reflexivity extend beyond the subjectivity of the self, which can, when ill-considered, be critiqued as “banal egoism” (Probyn 1993, 80) ), that is, using others as the means through which to present an idea of the self. The subjectivity of the other, given less attention in its construction, is assumed to simply present itself in the content of the transcript of the interview or recording. Such uses of reflexivity to examine the impact of researcher identity tend to foreground self-description and disclosures on the part of the researcher and background practices and participants. In contrast, with an exploration of instances of participant focused reflexivity-in-action, Riach (2009) demonstrates the active positioning of participants in the construction of knowledge in the research process.

Subedi (2006) suggests that such clear-cut approaches to researcher identities are rarely problematized in Western qualitative research, arguing that “Western-educated researchers are rarely trained to talk about themselves in fieldwork, and self–other binaries are reinforced because of the researchers’ inability or unwillingness to share their backgrounds and viewpoints.” (583). Subedi’s (2006) argument, constructed from a global perspective in transnational research, points to the necessity of an examination of culture or cultures of activity and how there ought to be an exploration and exposition of how reflection on “personal and professional identities are connected to larger sociopolitical discourses.” (584). Indeed, as Moghaddam (1999) suggests reflexive positioning practices are culturally embedded in conceptualizations of the self. In cultural anthropology, it is well-known that the encounters which the researcher experiences with participants from different cultures produce a realization that those who are researched “are acting with the weight of a cultural heritage behind them” (Nash 1963,152). The arguments that Nash (1963) made in the examination of the culture of cultural anthropologists resonate and become salient in the reflection of this particular research project, which sought to understand the culture of healthcare professionals in order to inform developments in interprofessional education. For Nash (1963) the researcher is a certain kind of stranger,

The adaptable stranger will learn to organize his experiences more and more in terms of the realities of the new situation. [...] As the stranger's point of view moves inexorably in the direction of host norms, it might be supposed (especially if he is favorably received) that he feels an increasing affinity with them. The paradox is that he does not. As he becomes more like the hosts he feels (up to a certain point) more of an outsider. His greater familiarity with the hosts and their ways tend to make him more aware of the gulf which separates him from them. Where at first he may have thought that he could negotiate the distance between him and the hosts in terms of his home culture, the task may look more and more hopeless [...] he begins to pass consciously into the limbo of marginality [...] ” (1963, 152)

Extending this idea of researcher as stranger to “professional stranger” as Agar (1996) does, the “limbo of marginality” is a useful viewpoint from which a professional stranger can examine the construction of knowledge. Reflexive practices therefore do have the potential to foreground the nature of the subjectivities under investigation. They can also create a point of critical inquiry for research goals, legitimacy and reciprocity. However, it might be more fruitful to move away from both a melancholic confessional stance on researcher identity with its focus on privileged self-examination and a routinized listing of the researcher’s identities, in order to move towards the exposure of how and why knowledge is presented and given in the way it is. As Pillow suggests in her discussion of Chaudhry (2000) and Visweswaran (1994) “reflexivity is not [...] to know who the author is but a critique of the disciplinary practices of ethnography and continual exposure of power relations” (Pillow, 2003,189).

An examination of interpersonal relations constructed through research encounters is one way to focus on such practices. Notably, Tarrant (2016) eschews fixed identity and unhelpful binaries to demonstrate the relations of negotiation in research encounters and focuses on the practices and positioning of interactants. This not only highlights the complexity of relationships in research settings, but demonstrates what is possible without recourse to identity. Also in doing so, the performative nature of talk is highlighted, which can often be forgotten in the translation from experience to text.

Agar (1996) illustratively argues that social science researchers, paralleling the psychoanalyst who must first go through the process of analysis before the analysis of others, ought to consider their own personality and cultural background before embarking on their study of human ways of being. With no awareness of what constructs their own frames of reference experienced through their personalities and cultures, how might it be possible to report and analyze on those of others? Indeed, as noted earlier it seems that there is an inability or unwillingness to expose such frames (Subedi, 2006). With no awareness of the subjectivity formed by culture and personality of the researcher, how then, Agar (1996) argues, can the resulting “evaluative tone of the description of the studied group” be examined (93)? It may be a difficult task to make the usual seem strange (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), but no stranger than being asked to reflect on the self, and not impossible, as the successfully accredited psychoanalyst demonstrates. Perhaps the processes involved in coming to know more about one’s own frames and ways of being are the same as those involved in coming to know someone else’s (Agar 1994, 15). However, there may be a difference, though slight, between the examination of the self required in qualitative research through the concept of reflexivity, and the uncovering of the position held in place by an ‘evaluative tone’. Rather than assuming a collection of roles and identities, semi-fixed or fixed, one might explore how it is that the self is really a function of the positions that are enacted in a dynamic and changing environment. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) argue that “the concept of positioning can be seen as a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role” (14). Referenced from Hollway’s (1984) theorizing of the construction of

subjectivity, they suggest that positions can be understood as a discursive process whereby participants in telling a story, relate themselves to one another and afford opportunities for others to do the same. Moghaddam (1999) suggests that this move away from 'role' to 'positioning' allows for a focus on the "negotiable aspects of interpersonal encounters" (75). This may be a way of disregarding lists of static identities in favour of dynamic enactments of a public self to see how it is that knowledge is being constructed between researcher and participant.

A focus on positioning instead of role or identity encourages an examination of *all* of the positions which emerge in interaction, not just those of the researcher. As discerned by van Langenhove and Harré (1999) "positioning can be understood as the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (16). Consider how *participants* are asking themselves: How do I manage the researcher's perceptions of me? What do I need to do in this situation? Researchers may be content to examine what participants say as presented in a transcript, but may overlook the illocutionary force (Austin 1962) with which it is said. Harré (2012) reminds us that words are never the full story of what is going on, i.e. what is the intention in saying the words? How are the words to be interpreted by the listener? How do these speech acts contribute to the storyline that unfolds in interaction with the speaker and listener?

Positioning, then, is precisely concerned with practices and participants; how people, as social actors, use words (and other types of discourse) to locate themselves and others; how people take up and negotiate places in conversations; what people can do and what they do in social episodes; and how they enact or ascribe rights and duties in interaction. Nestled within contemporary social constructionism in which psychic and social phenomena such as identity are understood as constructed through interactions (Hollway 1984; Potter and Wetherell 1988; Davies and Harré 1999; Van Langenhove 1999), the concept of positioning can be seen as a "dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role" (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999, 14). Rather than ascribing attributes to people, I draw on Positioning Theory to understand these unaccounted-for-encounters as social and meaningful acts, with a moral dimension in which participants enact and take up rights and duties, in a mutually determined unfolding storyline. An examination of positioning allows the search for the subjectivity of the other, and crucially for researchers, helps achieve an understanding of the construction of 'intersubjectivity', i.e. how does the researcher get to see the perspective of the researched?". Knowing how positions come to emerge from these encounters, through speech acts, storytelling, and the identification of the relational work to enact rights and duties, create a layer of data which can have both methodological and conceptual contribution. As Berger (2015) notes, researcher-participant positioning in relation to reflexivity is given scant attention. This paper aims to go some way to address that gap.

### **3. Encounters: acts of positioning**

At the beginning of the project discussed in this paper, the data to be collected were recordings of learner-teacher interactions in university and hospital settings. Given the hierarchical, institutionalized and sensitive nature of settings, before data could be collected access was granted, consent was given, and the goals, aims and purpose of the research and data collection methods were made explicit to a number of committees, stakeholders and potential participants. In the process of collecting data for this project, for which consent for participation had already been obtained 'conversations' emerged between the researcher and participants. This occurred before and after recordings took place. They were outside of the



planned methods of data collection in the sense that they were not recorded or generally foreseen. Unlike Griffiths' (1985) description of 'incidental data', these were not conversations overhead by chance or treated as 'data' for which consent was not negotiated. These conversations are the kind of social encounters which may go largely unnoticed and unaccounted for, but are nonetheless the kind of encounter which every researcher who has contact with participants experiences, regardless of the methodological approach. Despite their transactional purpose to collect consent forms or press a record button on a machine, these everyday, taken for granted encounters between an educational researcher and participant do not perform a solely transactional function; when noticed and listened to, they are social encounters, reminding us that the transactional wheel rarely turns without relational oil (McCarthy 1998) and that it is at the least curious to consider that the main function of any research encounter with human beings is not always a social one (Oakley 1981). The methodological reflections on my experiences of these unaccounted-for-encounters in an interprofessional research project are discussed below in relation to the concept of positioning.

### 3.1 "*Before we start, what is your background?*"

Throughout the face-to-face collection of data on this project a so-called 'insider' identity or complete-member researcher perspective (Adler and Adler 1987) could not be attributed on the basis of shared healthcare profession membership. The communication with participants prior to these encounters made the identities and roles of research team explicit and afforded opportunities to seek further information. Nonetheless, participants worked in these face-to-face encounters to elicit a public presentation of the researcher, which would in due course inform how the researcher's behaviour was to be viewed and how I was to be treated (Harré and van Langenhove 1999). "*Before we start, what is your background?*" was asked by participants in these encounters. With this reference to 'background', participants indexed field of study and disciplinary knowledge using the terms 'natural or social sciences, dentistry, medicine, nursing, pharmacy'. They also drew upon descriptions of contrasts, such as 'hard' and 'soft' sciences. But this question ought not to be understood as a simple request for information. Pre-positioning discourse references public notions of skills, attributes, and 'facts' as a way of establishing which rights and duties are to be ascribed in the interaction that follows. In this instance, the participants' question makes disciplinary knowledge significant because it positions the researcher as having (or not having) shared knowledge and consequently the right (or not) to comment on healthcare practices, i.e. you are not a doctor therefore you don't have the right to comment on my medical practices. Establishing who has the right to say or ask what of whom makes relevant what happens next in the interaction. It sets up the positions of the social actors in the story that will unfold (Harré et al. 2009).

In current UK contexts, employment contracts for academics can comprise both teaching and research (Breen et al. 2002). In these encounters, some participants drew a contrast between the different elements of their work as 'hard science' researchers in their subject areas and 'soft research' in relation to their teaching activity and educational scholarship. Positioning themselves first and foremost as healthcare professionals, and I, the researcher, as not, subsequently brought their positions as educators in these contexts to the fore. "*Do you know what it is like to teach at university?*" asked participants in these encounters. Again, this is not merely information seeking questions. This utterance is designed to position its intended recipient, whatever the response, as having a duty to be sympathetic, understanding and see their point of view. The semantic prosody of "*do you know what it is like*" is negative; e.g. *do you know what it is like... to be lonely, to have no*

*money*. (More rarely would one find the phrase used positively, e.g. ‘*do you know what it is like to have lots of money, to have a loving family?*’) It typically presumes a negative answer and presumes that the content cannot be well understood by those who do not share or have not ever shared the experience. The pragmatic force with which this directive was delivered and boosted by an emotive element resembles much more a plea for sympathy than a request for information. Given that participants had already established my position from which I had no rights to comment on their medical practices, it then had to be established what rights I had to comment on their teaching. If it was established that I had this right, then from this utterance, it became my duty to tell it how (negative) (from their point of view) it is.

These particular acts of positioning in these encounters were not about “who I am”. These acts were concerned with participants and researcher negotiating intersubjectivity, i.e. Are you going to see our point of view? Will you share and understand our thoughts, perceptions, meanings and emotions? They were the discourse practices through which participants could infer/signal power, ability and status, and through which the duties and rights of *both* researcher and participant could be ascribed. Thus, a focus on positioning rather than identity or role moderates the privileged self-disclosure of the researcher and pushes researchers to engage more evenly with all the positions to be examined. In doing so, it makes the how and why of shifting identities more transparent. As van Langenhove and Harré note “it is in the constant interplay of mutual recognition of one’s own and the other’s position that the particular version of public self appropriate to the occasion is constructed.” (1999:9). It also draws us closer to examine the relational work which goes on in the interaction between researcher and participants and how they work to share their meanings and understandings with one another.

In her discussion of strange encounters, Ahmed (2000) notes the surprising and conflictual nature of any encounter. There was indeed an awkwardness experienced in these encounters. It was the sensation and realization of the power being negotiated and enacted in these encounters. Although each participant was aware of the research project aims before the face-to-face encounter, any presumed moral order, i.e. who had the right to ask what of whom (van Langenhove and Harré 1999) still appeared to be something under negotiation. In healthcare disciplines run under hierarchical systems the perceived status of an educational researcher is not easily placed within such a system. The importance of establishing this may be deemed necessary in order to calculate any differential between participant and researcher. But reference to the role of “educational researcher” seemed too ambiguous to position a moral order on action. As van Langenhove and Harré (1999) observe “the more a person’s actions cannot be made intelligible by reference to roles, the more prominent personal positioning will be” (22). An uncomfortable question which emerges is: who takes responsibility for that personal positioning? In this case, as common practice in other research projects, the researcher was, at that moment, representative of a research team. In these encounters, the researcher was a person with a face, who had to be reacted to but was also representative of a “faceless” team of others who also had to be addressed. It may be useful to question who takes responsibility for this personal positioning. If researchers are obliged to take that responsibility as part and parcel of having entered into a contract of data collection, do they have the power to enact the duty of telling the story properly (i.e. describe viewpoints as thoroughly as possible or to produce an interpretation which “humanizes a stereotype” (Agar 1996, 107) ). Or does the power to enact such duties become displaced across a research team? These are amongst some of the consequential questions for educational researchers which can surface when positioning is examined.

### 3.2 “We must tell you our story”

The evaluation of the researcher's position, the understanding created relative to their own positions, and the establishment of the rights and duties of all interactants makes relevant what happens next. Participants and researcher moved to further relate to one another with reference to what was known to be shared about the project; the project goals. In the narrations that followed, participants positioned themselves within a professional collective which, among a number of other storylines, would 'naturally' and as a matter of 'fact' contribute to the goals of the project that the researcher and research team were working to achieve. This alignment temporarily rebalanced any differentials in power or status and momentarily positioned interactants in the same place from which they shared the meaning of participating in the project.

Within any conversation, positioning develops to tell a story. With actors and events, the story being communicatively produced was the sociocultural nature of their professional discipline. With reference to personal experiences and specific healthcare professional bodies, associations, and societies, the collective perspective on the discipline was presented (from the participant's point of view). This narration was constructed using inclusive and exclusive use of language, where participants in these discussions would position themselves as an individual and as a member of a professional discipline, and then present their views as representing their discipline as a collective; "we as educators", "we as healthcare professionals", "we as members of our community/association/council", and at times as asymmetrically positioned and distinct from the 'other' healthcare professionals; "the way we see 'our' (exclusive) patients". From the narration, professional specific evaluations emerged of the situations to be recorded which provided a frame on how their actions were to be interpreted. The goals and aims of the research project were to record and analyze 'their' way of doing something. It seemed incumbent upon participants to ensure that the interaction being recorded was understood as being bound within the socio-historical professional practice of the discipline and its perspective.

As social episodes, these encounters demonstrated the participants' enactment of the 'rights and duties' to say certain things from their position and in saying and creating the knowledge produced enacted the power to mould that knowledge which could be used by others (Harré and van Langenhove 1999). In presenting their viewpoint, individuals positioned themselves within a collective (a profession) and repositioned that collective relative to others. Unavoidably so, as Ahmed (2000) notes:

encounters between the embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of the particular-the face to face of this encounter- and the general-the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism. The particular encounter hence always carries traces of those broader relationships (Ahmed 2000, 8).

In relation to Agar's (1996) 'evaluative tone', in these encounters participants offered their evaluation of the site and practices being recorded. Evaluation in these conversations between researchers and participants expressed points of view, stance, attitudes and opinions and were a reflection of "the value system of that person and that community" (Hunston and Thompson 1999, 6). Expressing how things look from their point of view, they made declarations about the way things are. Positioning themselves, others and I within a storyline, participants (we) constructed a narration in which professional public self/selves could emerge. The intention of this evaluation was understood as the socio-political professional culture specific account of the context which informs what is displayed for the researchers in the data recordings. They were the embodied practices which produced an "account-able" state of affairs (Lynch 2000).

### 3.3 *"I didn't mean to tell you that"*

In these face-to-face encounters, participants presented the sociocultural knowledge (the story) of their discipline, created and told for the researcher standing in front of them. Story-telling ultimately ends in an evaluation by the teller, a coda. In constructing how they wanted the recorded interactions to be understood, and listing their reasons for participation despite considerable and significant barriers, the participants ultimately came to present their understanding of their own profession. One consequence of this story-telling was the reflexive self-positioning which participants undertook. With no forced positioning or requirement to do so, some participants reflected upon their version of their professional culture which they had just produced, e.g. *How do I see myself in this discipline? How do other healthcare professionals perceive me?* These acts of intentional reflexive self-positioning remind us that 'conceptions people have about themselves are disjointed until and unless they are located in a story' (Davies and Harré 1999, 49). It also pushes us to look at what we do in relation to the participants processes of reflexivity, which are passed over or given scant attention in research practice and research methods literature (Berger 2015).

In some instances the participant's commentary on the knowledge that they had created positioned themselves as having 'gone too far' or 'said too much' and at times directly stated *"I didn't mean to tell you that"*. On the one hand participants took up a position as the one who had the right to tell the researcher about the profession, thereby positioning the researcher as having a duty to listen, which was not resisted. On the other, positioning themselves as a member of the profession entailed a duty to convey the collective interests of that profession/discipline. In doing so, the position of the researcher shifted from having a duty to listen (due to earlier personal positioning) to having a right to consider whether or not the particular interests and goals of one collective profession (among many) were necessary to know from this person, in this encounter, for the purposes of the research project. These participant utterances signal the shifts and change in positions. There is no contradiction in such positioning shifts and neither should such accountive positioning be seen as problematic. As Davies and Harré note: "speakers beliefs about themselves...do not necessarily form a unified coherent whole. They shift from one to another way of thinking about themselves as the discourse shifts and their positions within varying storylines are taken up" (1999, 49).

The intention of these various acts of positioning ought not to be viewed as something exclusively coercive, manipulative or indeed unique. They are simply part of the interactional negotiation which takes place in all types of everyday interpersonal encounters (Moghaddam 1999). Rather than seeking to eliminate what might be interpreted by some as bias, such negotiation and interpersonal practices can be examined as the work participants (researchers or participants) do in order for a particular public self to appear at all. In this project, the discussion in these unaccounted for encounters during data gathering produced a sociopolitical professional culture specific account of the context that holds their professional self in place and emerged with the researcher as a function of the situation and all that it enacts.

## 4. Conclusion

Exploring the unaccounted for encounters, understanding positions, and that which is necessary to hold up those positions, may serve to fill the gap which many have argued is missing or problematic in research characterised as 'insider-outsider', e.g. given the non-shared identity of the researcher, meanings which participants intended cannot be adequately interpreted. The aim of attempting any process of reflexivity is not to 'see' from the viewpoint of another, but to see another's viewpoint. This is not recourse to ontological egotism, but rather an understanding that meaning takes meaning only in its context of use, and there is a difference that language allows between 'seeing from the viewpoint of another' and 'seeing another's viewpoint'. If these did carry the same meaning the extension might be: in order to explore the professional identity of healthcare professionals, *I* need to become one to give *me* the answer. This extension however falls back on the notion of 'insider-outsider researcher identity' and the criticisms of all that entails. Therefore rather than assume a collection of roles and identities, semi-fixed or fixed, in this paper I have explored how it is that 'the self' is really a function of the positioning that is taken in a dynamic and changing environment. Referenced from Hollway's (1984) theorizing of the construction of subjectivity (van Langenhove and Harré 1999) positions can be understood as a discursive process whereby people in telling a story, relate themselves to one another and afford opportunities for others to do the same.

Critiquing notions of researcher identity within the arena of reflexive practices, it has been argued that positioning is a more dynamic metaphor than role or identity. It offers a clearer view of the "negotiable aspects of interpersonal encounters" (Moghaddam 1999, 75) and a more refined tool with which to examine the intricacies of the social construction of knowledge in research projects. Drawing on unaccounted for encounters in the process of data collection, this paper has illustrated that an examination of (researcher) positioning does not foreground the researcher's self-description in relation to that of the participants. It enables the consideration of all positions (participants and researcher/s) including shifting positions; and it makes the interpersonal practices which participants and researcher work at in interaction explicit. In particular, an examination of positioning enables an understanding of how knowledge can be constructed and the power therein. The researcher-participant encounters discussed in this paper were sites of knowledge construction which traversed professional and educational territories. They were transient opportunities for negotiated explicitness and perspective showing. An examination of not only which positions emerge, but also how such positions come to emerge from these encounters creates a layer of data which can have both methodological and conceptual impact for educational research.

As the socio-political environment of educational research moves towards more interdisciplinary and team-based research, it is crucial to reassess the usefulness of the notion of insider-outsider research. At its worst in such an environment, a superficial approach to the notion of researcher identity may only reproduce the same cultural knowledge about professions, disciplines, social groups, and individuals. It therefore may fail to contribute an understanding of what has to be present for the phenomenon under research to appear at all (Probyn 1993). Permeable boundaries of disciplines may be overlooked, or imaginary ones reaffirmed. Assumptions of shared knowledge which are never made explicit may hinder interdisciplinary working. Professions, and arguably disciplines have their own 'sub cultures' or discipline specific practices (Groom 2005) within which "unmarked insiderness" (Labaree 2002:118) can pose issues. But at its best, critically reflexive practices can produce insight into topic and process. As disciplinary boundaries open up and as larger multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary teams become more commonplace, an examination of positioning can be used to make both the tacit knowledge and the power enacted through

relationship overt, and it can assist researchers to attune to the processes of the social construction of knowledge both within the research teams and in the process of research.

In the context of developing researchers and delivering educational research methods training, the idea of distinct insider-outsider research is a teachable one. It can be part of a stepped introduction to more complex notions of reflexivity, power, status, detachment, engagement, involvement, ethics, exploitation, reciprocity (Katyal and King 2011; White and Fitzgerald 2010; Mercer 2007). But however teachable and useful for some purposes it may be, there may be a danger that it becomes entrenched, leading to perhaps predictable and prosaic research which has failed to recall that such notions “exist[...] in conceptualization rather than fact” (Christensen and Dahl 1997, 282). Unintentionally, the presentation of simplified notions can encode as ‘given’ the variation in value which is attributed to different types of research, e.g. the privileging of one over the other (Thomson and Gunter 2011). An investigation of acts of positioning engages with how particular public presentations of the self emerge in interaction, as such it does not privilege the construction of one position over another. All positions are focused upon, indeed they have to be. The criticism that reflexive practices can lead to over-indulgence in the self and prosaic interpretations can thus be avoided.

Ensuring that research continues to be conducted from a number of different methodological approaches seems vital in what appears to be an increasingly quantitative favoured research environment (see Special Issues in this journal: Pampaka, Williams, and Homer 2016). However, it is crucial that any research is capable of demonstrating its rigour. Relying on ‘shared’ assumptions presented in a list of situated identities or an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of a particular ‘identity’ over another lacks the precision, power, and transparency to explain how the research has been constructed and how interpretations are reached. A focus on positioning can help to make concrete what is understood in qualitative research terms such as ‘truth’ and ‘integrity’. Rather than documenting the effect of personal ‘bias’, it offers a methodological way of seeing how knowledge is constructed in relation to project goals.

For educational researchers, a concern with positioning as the negotiation of moral order affords a more direct route to core ethical issues in social science research than is currently claimed to exist. Contemporary research has been depicted as “colonized by of an audit culture” (Baumann 2000, 86) in which as White and Fitzgerald (2010) argue standards “serve to protect the institution rather than assist researchers to negotiate ethical processes and protocols with participants” (273). Investigating acts of positioning can help to make visible the negotiation of power and position which can often go unseen and can offer contributions to discussions on ethical concerns regarding the effect of the research on the researched, or the effects of the researcher on participants (and vice versa). It can also push at the hidden complexities and more labile aspects of research which do not neatly fit with a checklist view of ethics in which regardless of information sheets and consent forms, seeking and giving consent is bound in social episodes of rights and duties.

Understood as a discursive process whereby participants in telling a story, relate themselves to one another and afford opportunities for others to do the same, positioning offers a strong alternative to researcher identity. To work through layers of knowledge and examine how they are represented and constructed through acts of positioning produces methodological precision. Such activity has the potential to challenge the production of prosaic research which produces superficial understandings with methods of rigour which rely on positivistic notions of reliability, and instead incorporate the use of critical methods, commensurable with the philosophy of qualitative research. Perhaps too, this activity reminds researchers that data and knowledge are always created in situ between participant and researcher, and that all work, even alone, is based on and with the experiences of others.

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